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# Sustainable universities – a study of critical success factors for participatory approaches

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ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches can be seen as a requirement, but also as a benefit to the overall paradigm change towards sustainable development and contribute towards the integration of sustainability concept into the university culture. So far, there have been comparatively few research studies on participation within sustainability implementation at university level, and a more differentiated understanding of these processes is still missing, both in the practice of conducting a participatory process and in the sustainability assessment. This paper addresses some of the failures and successes experienced within participatory approaches in campus sustainability initiatives, and deduces a set of critical success factors and emergent clusters that can help to integrate the dimensions of participation more inclusively into sustainability assessment. Following a qualitative approach and inspired by the Delphi-method, semi-structured expert interviews ($N = 15$) and four focus group discussions ($N = 36$), with participants coming from twenty different countries in total, were conducted and compared according to qualitative content analysis. Findings give empirical evidence to some of the characteristics related to stakeholder engagement, and associate higher education for sustainable development to empowerment and capacity building, shifting away from a previous focus on environmental sustainability. The success of participatory approaches is interdependent with structural institutional conditions and the persons engaged, highlighting the importance of specific skills and participatory competencies. A better integration of the dimensions of participation into sustainability assessment practices can help in defining and establishing participatory approaches on institutional level and fostering a culture of participation in the transition to sustainable universities.



## 1. Introduction

Participation is seen as pre-requisite for achieving sustainable development (SD), as officially acknowledged in Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992b). It is one of the buzzwords that has entered the sustainability discourse (Stakeholder Forum, 2012), but lacks a more differentiated use and application (Cornwall, 2008). Universities, seen as key players in the promotion of SD (Cortese, 2003; Lozano, 2006a; Leal Filho, 2011; Sterling et al., 2013) are making advancements in SD implementation (e.g. in terms of campus greening, curriculum renewal and research orientations) and follow a manifold variety of implementation strategies (Brinkhurst et al., 2011; Barth, 2013; Mader, 2013; Saadatian, 2009), of which some include also participatory approaches (Disterheft et al., 2012b).

At the same time, within the overall SD debate, a high emphasis is being given to assessments as well as to the development of SD indicators, in order to monitor progress, to identify strength and weaknesses, to correct deficits and prevent unwanted effects. Universities apply different types of assessment tools in order to assess their sustainability performance: for example, standardised and non-standardised instruments (such as environmental management systems and ISO products, or internal audits and reports, respectively) and also an elevated number of university-specific assessment tools (Roorda, 2001; Beringer, 2006; Lozano, 2006b,

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2010; Glover et al., 2011; AASHE, 2012). Nevertheless, the dimensions of participation, referring to the active engagement of students, faculty, non-teaching staff and relevant external stakeholders, are less considered in sustainability assessment practices and show reduced perceptions of participation (Disterheft et al., 2012a; Saadatian et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is still a focus on environmental sustainability, and more holistic approaches are necessary to achieve the proclaimed paradigm change towards sustainable universities (Alshuwaikait and Abubakar, 2008; Ferrer-Balas et al., 2009; Lozano et al., 2013).

Participatory approaches can be seen as a requirement, but also as a benefit to the overall paradigm change towards SD and contribute towards the integration of SD into the university culture. So far, there have been comparatively few research studies on participation within sustainability implementation at university level, and a more differentiated understanding of these processes is still missing, both in practice of conducting a participatory process as well as in the sustainability assessment.

Most research related to participation is done outside of the university context and focuses on environmental planning (Bass et al., 1995; Reed, 2008), rural and community development (Lowe et al., 1999; Fraser et al., 2006; Thabrew et al., 2009), volunteering (Lozano, 2012) or policy-making on local and regional level (Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1997; Singleton, 2000). But higher education institutions (HEI) have particular characteristics and dynamics (Adomssent et al., 2007) and are required to develop a specific research agenda targeting sustainable universities (Stephens and Graham, 2010; Waas et al., 2010), for which reason it becomes necessary to explore in more depth what participation can mean in the university context. In doing so, the complex challenges inherent to participation and sustainability implementation can be better understood, and knowledge can be adapted to the specific needs of sustainability practitioners in HEI, who execute and assess these processes.

Consistent with this thinking, the objective of this on-going, cross-sectional study is to investigate participatory processes in university sustainability initiatives, with the final purpose to develop assessment criteria and a tool for a better integration of the dimensions of participation into sustainability assessment related practices in HEI. The relevance of this work is based on the fact that empirical knowledge in this field is still scarce and practical advice yet to be adapted to the university context.

The specific objective of this paper is to analyse the opinions and experiences of sustainability practitioners, in order to identify critical success factors (CSF) for an effective participation of the academic community in the transition towards sustainable universities. It focuses on both, failures and successes experienced in participatory sustainability initiatives, from which a set of CSF is deduced and examined for relationships and patterns, preparing therefore the way for a more inclusive assessment of these processes.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study comprises broad areas related to social theories. A focus is set on theories of democracy, in particular on questions about participation, governance and stakeholder engagement (section 2.1). These questions are linked to the educational concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), for this study applied to the university context (Section 2.2).

### 2.1. Participation, governance and stakeholder engagement

Participation is associated to the understanding of democracy and the relationship between citizens and state, being the theories of *representative democracy* and *participative democracy* the two most important strands in democratic theories. Both theories consider participation as essential to democratic governance and in forming legitimate institutions, even though the relation between civil society and state is perceived differently in each strand (Keohane, 2002; Brodie et al., 2009).

Based on these theories, and influenced by the preoccupation about the 'democratic' deficit that many Western societies are confronted with (Smith, 2005), new forms of participation methods and techniques have emerged, often related to *public participation* like participatory budgeting, citizen's juries and partnership governance (Fung and Wright, 2001; Fung, 2006; Cornwall, 2008). Public participation refers to the practice of consulting and involving members of the public into agenda settings, decision- and policy making of organisations or institutions (Rowe and Frewer, 2004) which is nowadays also associated with stakeholder engagement (Blomgren Bingham et al., 2005), often based on Freeman's (1984) stakeholders approach. Other forms of participation are *individual* and *social participation:* the first category refers to individual choices and actions as a statement for a society one would like to live in (e.g. voting, but also individual consumer attitudes and options of life styles), the second relates to collective activities one is engaged in on a regular basis, e.g. in one's community (Cornwall, 2008; Brodie et al., 2009).

In practice, the boundaries of different participation forms are blurred and can be found sometimes all together in a single project or process (ibid.). The literature distinguishes also different levels of participation, referring to distinct degrees of citizen power (Arnstein, 1969) and scopes of participation, depending on whether the objectives of participation target merely to inform or consult the public or whether it is intended to empower the participants (International Association for Public Participation, 2007). White (1996) sets the focus on underlying interests of participation and identifies *normative*, *instrumental*, *representative* and *transformative* types of participation.

In particular, participatory democracy is seen as an imperative way to revitalise the concept of democracy, to keep communities agile and public institutions accountable (Potter et al., 1994; Roberts, 2004). Agenda 21 enforces this approach by requesting to integrate participation on all societal as a sustainability principle and attributes a notably role of importance to education, including educational institutions such as universities (UNCED, 1992a, Ch. 36). This integration has consequently impacts on governance structures and stakeholder engagement (Hemmati, 2002; Shattock, 2002), and urges HEI to implement "a new mode of governing that is distinct from the hierarchical control model, [following] a more cooperative mode" (Enders, 2004, p. 379).

Stakeholder groups of HEI can be classified by internal/external, individual/collective, academic/non-academic stakeholders, being faculty, staff and students, but as well the government or other substantial supporters the main stakeholders (Jongbloed et al., 2008). The selection of relevant stakeholders should be executed carefully (ibid., Reed et al., 2009), as stakeholder engagement bears risks and advantages at the same time. Risks, for example, can be stakeholders lacking skills and resources (like time) to engage in a meaningful level, or self-interest and instrumentality on the part of the institution, or an overall lack of fundamental agreement and common objective about what is actually required for sustainability at a systems level (Collins et al., 2005). Advantages, on the other hand, can be seen in (i) capturing knowledge, (ii) increasing ownership, (iii) reducing conflict, (iv) encouraging innovation (*management perspective*); or in (v) inclusive decision-making, (vi) promotion of equity and (vii) building of social capital (*ethical perspective*); as well as (viii) more dialogue, (ix) reflection of own values and attitudes and (x) development of shared visions and objectives (*social learning perspective*) (Narain Mathur et al., 2008).

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